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Factors influencing the employment experience and aspirations of a cohort of beginning teachers: Two years on

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Abstract

Contemporary beginning teachers have a diverse mix of ages and prior experiences and many are seeking teaching work beyond their own state in a rapidly changing national and international market. The purpose of this longitudinal study is to investigate the employment experience and changing aspirations of a cohort of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) who entered the teaching workforce in 2003 in a 'tight teaching labour market'. The case study commenced with a sample of 174 beginning teachers from a regional Australian university. The purpose of this paper is to report on their employment experiences two years on and changes in their contemporary and medium term aspirations.

The paper initially explores the current employment status and professional roles held of the 40 beginning teachers who responded to the second survey. Changes occurred in the two years in their preferred employment aspirations and their realistic expectations for the type, sector and location of teaching work. The second survey identified mentoring and a variety of experiences as a casual teacher promoted their confidence and effectiveness as a teacher. Student growth and interest in learning, positive relationships with staff and community gave the most satisfaction. Finally the paper reports that family, travel and undertaking further qualification were the most influential factors on beginning teachers' medium term professional aspirations.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report the second phase of a descriptive inquiry into the contemporary and medium term employment experiences and aspirations of a cohort of recently qualified teachers. These beginning teachers entered the teaching workforce in 2003 following their final year in a teacher education program at a regional Australian university. The long term purpose of this research project is to track as many of this cohort as possible through their emerging career paths.

The factors influencing this cohort's initial professional aspirations and preferred teaching placements as newly qualified teachers have been reported by Booth (2003 and 2004). A comparative study of this group with a cohort of beginning teachers from a UK PGCE program has been reported by Booth and Timson (2004).

Theoretical framework

Young (1995) reviews two of the competing theories for occupational selection which will help frame this paper. Holland's (1973) theory of careers suggests vocational and careers choices are made by individuals based on the fit between their perception of their personality and the job environment. This view contrasts with Ochsner & Solomon's (1979) market-responsive model which suggests that individuals make occupational choices based on demand and the level of compensation. The analysis will explore the extent to which these theories are reflected in the reported changes over the first two years in the beginning teachers' expectations.

Context: Is there a teacher shortage?

The demand and supply for primary and secondary teachers at both the international (Longsdale and Ingvarson, 2003), national and state levels has been an issue of ongoing debate. The Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 2001) and Kemp when the Federal Minister of Education have argued that a significant shortfall [of up to 30,000] in the numbers of teachers was likely as the "baby boomer teachers" commence to retire from 2006. Preston (1999 and 2003) contends the magnitude of this claim while acknowledging there will be shortfalls in particular subject specialisations, in rural and

remote areas and in specific types of school. The patterns are complex and vary by state and sector. Preston (2003) concludes there will be “a generally tight teaching labour market” (p41).

The unions have argued the case for increasing the attractiveness of teaching in a number of state based wage negotiations. The Conference of Education System Chief Executive Officers’ (CESCEO, 1998) draft study counters the ‘grim’ supply projections and report that nationally there was “sufficient supply for both primary and secondary teachers be available to meet the expected slight increase in demand for teachers over the period 1998 to 2001” (p.i). The report argues that the growth in demand will come in part from increased retention in the upper secondary, shortages in particular secondary specialisations [Mathematics & Sciences, IT, LOTE and PE], strong growth in non-government enrolments [often with reduced class size ratios] and some reduction in average class size in the early primary grades in all sectors.

A background paper by Ainley and Underwood (2003) in the recently released Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education identified several conclusions. Several are highlighted:

- There are a number of uncertainties involved in projections of both the supply and demand for teachers;
- The projected deficit in supply is much more an issue for secondary than primary schools;
- New and improved data collection and qualitative research is required;
- Policy directions need to take account of teacher mobility, changing career expectations and competition from other sectors;
- Teaching now has a global market, at least among English-speaking countries.(pp 96-97)

NSW teacher employment context

The mid 1990s was characterized by an oversupply of primary teachers in NSW. There is some debate as to whether the suggested pool of over 15,000 teachers in 1997 (CESCEO, p.36) working outside education or not employed were effectively available in the specialisations and areas where vacancies occur. However the 1998 report suggests that the labour market for primary teachers will continue to be in oversupply in NSW with some difficulties in recruiting for some remote locations. In secondary the projected shortages in TAS [Technology and Applied Studies] the Sciences and Mathematics have prompted the initiation of special programs. The decline in the availability of casual relief would appear to be the most pressing issue in NSW, despite recent initiatives.

Ramsey (2000) argues that while initial supply can be in part be predicted, projecting demand is much more difficult and sensitive to government policy decisions, population cycles, retention rates, overseas and interstate teaching and non-teaching employment opportunities and changing resignation rates of the aging teaching workforce. On balance Ramsey argues that the “supply is tightening” and all school sectors either by location for primary teachers or secondary specialisation are having difficulty in attracting quality teachers.

In Preston’s (2003) comprehensive analysis the teaching workforce she postulates the likely career experiences of three teacher cohorts. She argues the current beginning and early career cohort enter schools with marked age-bifurcation. These young beginning teachers have had very high net separation rates. This is both a local as well as an international concern (Bobeck, 2002). In part these new teachers are seeking; alternative employment when positions were not available, travel, further study and women in their late 20s and early 30s are planning to have a family. This study explores in detail the recent employment experiences and aspirations of an early career cohort.

Method

Three sub-questions have framed the design and reporting of the second phase of the inquiry:

1. What is the current employment and educational status of the respondents?
2. Have preferred employment aspirations and their realistic expectations for the type, sector and location of teaching work changed over the two-year period since graduation?
3. Have there been changes in the factors influencing recently graduated teachers’ contemporary and medium term professional aspirations?

A descriptive design using a survey with a combination of closed and open-ended items was used in the initial and the current study. A pilot survey was developed from issues identified from practice, Young’s (1995) perspective and question ideas from the career aspirations section of a survey developed the Yarrow et al (1995)

in a Queensland study of final year pre-service teachers. The draft survey was checked by a representative group of research colleagues and piloted with a small number of final year students to check the format and coherence. The initial survey was completed by 174 final year students from a Faculty of Education's four pre-service programs.

The initial survey had a range of biographical and eleven employment and professional aspiration questions. The questions were framed in terms of "in the next 1 to 2 years" and "in 3 to 5 years" they'd prefer and expect to be located. Two open-ended questions asked the respondents to describe the "factors influencing their professional aspirations" and the more general "influences on their immediate and medium term plans". The survey had an attached confidential and coded invitation to participate in a follow-up survey. All the data were collected in the final week of the students' on-campus program in November 2002.

The second phase survey was of similar construction with the addition of questions that explored the beginning teachers work and study record, the roles they had in schools, the factors that had developed their confidence, effectiveness and satisfaction as well as the influences on their contemporary and medium term plans. The second survey was forwarded to 75 beginning teachers who had indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up survey.

Table 1 Respondent numbers in 2002 and 2004 by program and gender

	Diploma in Education		Secondary PDHPE		Bachelor of Education (Primary)		Bachelor of Teaching Primary		Total	
	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004
Male	21	3	17	5	8	1	8	1	54	10
Female	40	8	17	3	24	8	39	11	120	30
Total	61	10	34	8	32	10	47	12	174	40
No. in 2002 program	200		65		70		158		493	
% of the 2002 program	30		52		50		30		35	
% of the 2002 sample		16%		24%		32%		26%		23%

The survey was sent both as a paper document and as an email attachment to their last know email and residential addresses. A pleasing response rate of 53 per cent [40] was achieved given informal knowledge that many of the cohort were travelling and teaching overseas, had moved from their last university address [return to sender responses] as well as the cohort having had their university email address withdrawn. The second phase of the study has 23 per cent [40] of the original 2002 NQTs cohort [Table 1]. The Dip Ed group were the least likely to respond [16%] while 32 per cent of the BEd group returned their survey.

Results

Current employment experience

Only one person responding in 2004 had secured work outside the education sector and had become a journalist. Seventy per cent of the group [28] had secured full time work in schools or a related education industry within two years of graduation. A much smaller proportion of the newly qualified teachers [17%] have continued to work either part-time or casually as teachers since graduation. The balance of the group [13%] who were not working had been travelling overseas [3], having a family [1] and one was undertaking full time tertiary study [with some part-time university teaching].

Those with full time jobs had held these positions from six months to two years. Seventy per cent were in NSW government schools and the others had positions in a mix of CEO [Catholic Education Office] and independent schools. Seventy three per cent had positions within the greater Sydney Metro or Illawarra areas, twenty per cent were elsewhere in NSW and one overseas.

While the majority of those with full time positions had been working as primary or secondary class teachers, over sixty per cent had been given enhanced responsibilities. Four reported that they had the role of a subject or grade co-ordinator, three had been mentor teachers and seven others had additional roles to their regular work in the class room.

The newly qualified teachers working casually or part-time reported that they had worked across all school systems as well as in disability services and outdoor education. Those who had identified as being overseas and/or travelling had all undertaken some supply teaching in the UK.

Formal professional development

Just under half of the group [45%] had commenced or had completed a new qualification in the two year period since graduation [Table 2].

Table 2 Newly qualified teachers undertaking a new qualification by program of study [n=40]

	Diploma in Education	Secondary PDHPE	Bachelor of Education (Primary)	Bachelor of Teaching Primary	Total %
Undertaking a new qualification %	30	13	50	75	45%
Total	3	1	5	9	18

The most frequent professional development activity was the three year BTeach [primary] graduates upgrading to a four year qualification at their own university. The BEd teachers were active in undertaking Certificates of Religious and Gifted Education. Two of the three Dip Ed graduates were working on a Special Education Diploma at another university and one had completed a Master in Educational Leadership.

Changes in preferred and realistic employment aspirations since graduation

The reported separation increased from a projected loss of 15 per cent in the next one or two years 20 per cent in three to five years of this group of newly qualified teachers [Table 3].

Table 3 Newly qualified teachers' employment aspirations in 2 and 3-5 years by program of study [n=40]

	Teaching		Not teaching	
	2 Yrs	3-5 Yrs	2 Yrs	3-5 Yrs
Dip Ed	7	8	3	2
PDHPE	8	6	0	2
BEd	9	9	1	1
BTeach	10	9	2	3
Total %	85%	80%	15%	20%

The four year trained primary teachers would appear from this quite small sample to be the least likely to leave the profession. Being a mother or caring for a child was the most frequently cited explanation. When asked if they would 'not be teaching' in the future the four equally cited responses were; starting a family, travelling, looking for another or more stable job and starting a business.

When asked for their preferred teaching mode in 2004 there were some significant shifts from the 2002 preferences [Table 4]. In the next 2 years there was an aspiration to move away from casual teaching [19% to 3%] and part time [17% to 13%] toward full time [64% to 86%] by the female beginning teachers. For the male teachers their short term aspirations were more or less the same as their initial teaching aspirations [casual 20%, part time 10% and full time 70%].

In the 3 to 5 year horizon female teachers had a steady interest in casual [7%], a three fold increase in part time [7% to 20%] and a commensurate drop in full time work in the medium term [86% to 73%]. This corresponds with family and travel plans reported earlier. The male beginning teachers had no interest in casual work,

increased interest by some in part time work [5% to 20%] and 80 per cent were looking for full time teaching work in three the five years [Table 4].

Table 4 NQTs preferred teaching mode by gender [N=173 in 2002: n=40 in 2004]

Program	Casual %				Part-time %				Full time %			
	1-2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs		1-2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs		1-2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs	
	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004
Male	22	20	5	0	10	10	5	20	68	70	90	80
Female	19	3	7	7	17	13	7	20	64	84	86	73

The pessimism that was reported by Booth (2003) in the initial employment expectations of this case study group has not changed over their first two years in the workforce. When the teachers were asked for their 'realistic expectations' two years on the data by their pre-service program is still very pessimistic for some groups. Half of the BTeach group and third of the Dip Ed group realistically reported they'd be still working casually in 3 to 5 years [Table 5] despite their preference to be part time, but preferably full time.

Table 5 NQTs realistically expected teaching opportunities by program of study [N=126 in 2002: n=40 in 2004]

Program	Casual %				Part-time %				Full time %			
	1-2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs		1-2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs		1-2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs	
	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004
Dip. Ed	53	30	26	30	11	10	7	10	36	60	67	60
PDHPE	7	38	11	0	58	13	11	37	32	50	78	63
B. Ed.	42	10	19	0	10	0	4	10	48	90	77	90
B. Teach.	66	42	21	50	14	0	9	0	20	50	70	58

Only 63 per cent of the secondary PE teachers reported any chance for full time work in the medium term, the balance [37%] would realistically have to accept part time employment if they stayed in teaching. The realistic opportunity for full time work by the initially three year trained primary teachers did not improve significantly in the 3 to 5 year horizon [50% to 58%].

Shifts in the level of teaching were identified in the two year period [Table 6]. There has been increased interest in secondary and tertiary. However the numbers are small and the changes may not be representative. Across the cohort there was a 10 per cent drop in interest to teach primary by the primary graduates and a move to work in secondary schools. Anecdotal evidence suggests that work in secondary language support has fitted well with the experience of some primary trained graduates.

Table 6 Level of teaching preference by gender in the next 2 years and 3-5 years in 2002 [N=150] and 2004 [n=40]

Preferred level of teaching:	Total %				Males %				Females %			
	2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs		2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs		2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs	
	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004	2002	2004
Primary	57	63	52	52	38	30	39	20	67	77	58	63
Secondary	35	24	37	33	51	70	51	50	28	20	31	27
Tertiary	7	3	9	15	11	0	10	30	4	3	9	10
Preschool	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0

The medium term interest to work in the tertiary sector has come from students undertaking higher degree studies following an honours degree or a masters after completing their Dip Ed [Table 6]. A disproportionate number of male teachers have indicated a shift toward a tertiary career.

Sector preferences remained steady for government schools both between 2002 and 2004 for both the initial and 3 to 5 year periods [average 45%]. There was a slight drop in the preference for an independent school for the initial period [24% to 18%] however in both the initial and 3 to 5 year preferences for independent school was 18 per cent. Not concerned was 35 per cent for both time periods in the current responses. Currently the males in the

case study cohort would opt 60 per cent for a government school and 40 per cent were not concerned. For the female teachers they had a steady preference pattern across the two time periods with 43 per cent government, 23 per cent independent and 34 per cent were not concerned about the type of school they could secure work.

Location preferences have become more focused toward NSW since their initial preferences were identified in 2002 [Table 7]. There has been a shift from local [total NSW] to overseas and unconcerned in the 3 to 5 year period by the current respondents. While the initial urge [19% to 23%] to go overseas in the 2002 data is not obviously repeated in the current figures (as few overseas based responses were received), many teachers identified on their survey that an overseas trip and teaching was “on the cards – depending”. It “depends if the full time job comes up, other wise I’m (we’re) off!”

Table 7 Preferred teaching location in 1-2 and 3-5 years in 2002 and 2004

Preferred location	All % [n=40]			
	1-2 Yrs		3-5 Yrs	
	2002	2004	2002	2004
<i>Local</i>		80		58
Total NSW	70	83	57	78
Interstate	7	8	13	5
Overseas	19	6	23	8
Unconcerned	4	6	7	10

Male teachers reflected a more mobile preference profile. The male teachers were more likely (30%) to be planning an overseas teaching experience than the female teachers (6%). Males were more likely to consider a move interstate [20%] compared to the female teachers [3%] in the sample. Preferences for total NSW and unconcerned were more or less the same for males and female beginning teachers.

Changes in the factors influencing recently graduated teachers’ contemporary and medium term professional aspirations

The survey provided a rich opportunity to explore a cohort of beginning teachers’ initial profession induction and work as a teacher. A wide range of factors influenced their teaching and professional choices. Specifically the inquiry sought to explore the factors that developed confidence and their effectiveness as a teacher.

Family responsibilities was a central node in a complex balancing process which was reflected in the beginning teachers responses. The availability of a position in a location that allowed family responsibilities to be met was a major concern for many. Several indicated that they had declined a targeted job because it was more than 100 km away. “I accepted mobile teaching position as I wanted full-time work, this was a second best alternative.”

The enjoyment of facilitating student learning, “seeing their progress over the whole year” was a central to the some and balanced the family, financial and travel concerns. Coupled with this dimension was their reported involvement in extra curricular activities (e.g. Rock Eisteddfod, sport) as well as the school community. Positive and supportive staff relationships allowed experience in others classrooms and “watching a variety of experience and other experiment”. For many the professional learning continued both at school and through formal studies they undertook during their first two years of teaching.

Teacher confidence and effectiveness

Specifically the beginning teachers were asked to identify the factors that assisted the development of their confidence and effectiveness as a teacher. Having mentoring support from fellow teachers and colleagues was cited by 80 per cent of the teachers. Mentors who provided support and compliments were identified as school colleagues as well as from outside their school. The second ranked factor was the experience and practice from teaching at a variety of schools as a casual. This included teaching a variety of subjects and an opportunity for some trial and error - “one day risk taking”.

In rank order the 3rd to 5th influences were; professional development activities and continuing study, supportive and empowering leadership from the principal, executive teachers or supervisor, positive feedback from students and parents and equally working as a team member.

Aspects of the workplace that encouraged satisfaction

Over half of the teachers mentioned the development of their students. "Seeing them grow and develop and students who all of a sudden clicked." The next four areas in rank order were; positive relationships with students [43%], staff and community [28%], positive and enthusiastic student attitudes to learning [25%], collaboration with colleagues for shared resources and experiences [10%] and having a regular income [5%].

Five areas that gave the least satisfaction were each cited by a quarter of the respondents. The most frequently mentioned area was 'work expectations' followed by classroom management issues. "Negative school politics", "other lazy teacher attitudes" and "lack of decisive decision making by uninspiring leaders" were components of poor work relationships. Dealing with parents was the fifth most frequently mentioned source of low beginning teacher satisfaction [10%].

Influences on future plans

The teachers were asked to identify the immediate and medium term [3-5 years] influences on their plans. For the immediate time their personal and family situation was equal to travel and having an overseas experience [30%]. These two influences were followed in rank order by completing a higher qualification [20%], securing a more secure position and a consolidation of professional skills.

While personal and family situations [having a baby, husband retiring or relocating] continued as the top priority in the medium term [35%], it was followed by higher qualifications or retraining and travel. Personal interests [art and music], lifestyle choices and variety of work and non-work experiences as well as continuing to make a difference with students emerged as more or less equal [15%] by group.

While being an effective class teacher was the medium term goal of most of the beginning teachers, more than a quarter saw themselves in an executive role as a grade of subject coordinator, deputy and one a principal. Several mentioned being a teacher mentor.

Discussion

The substantial gaps between the beginning teachers' preferred employment status and what they actually expected both initially and after three to five years (Booth, 2003) has persisted after two years in the workforce. The sense of 'realistic pessimism' was greatest for women seeking part time and full time work both initially and after five years. The data from this small cohort suggests a separation rate of 20 per cent after five years. Travel and family continue to be the most significant reasons for leaving, perhaps temporarily, the profession.

Teaching was seen as an international or global vocation in their combined professional and personal life. Teaching overseas continues to be an important aspiration for a third of the male teachers. The female teachers two years on are more concerned to secure a local part time or full time position that fits with family responsibilities and or their partners work location. A desire by primary teachers to change to secondary or tertiary has increased over time. From this data the likelihood of teacher supply projections for NSW schools suggested by Ramsey may require some downward revision.

Is teaching primarily a fit of personality factors to profession role as Holland suggests or the Ochsner & Solomon's market responsive career based theory? The factors influencing the beginning teachers' professional aspirations in this study continue to clearly reflected a desire to develop and contribute as a professional in a career that inspired others and has opportunities for travel and cross cultural experiences. Young's (1995) findings from her sample of elite beginning teachers in Californian were reflected in this study. Initially professional aspirations were clearly moderated by the economics of financial security, repaying loans, working in a desirable location were reflected in the three to five year period toward family/partner, location of teaching

work and financial priorities. Enhancing their professional skills through further study and shared professional experience were important influences.

The development of competence as a teacher and confidence and a capacity to make a difference were enhanced by the mentoring and the diversity of casual teaching experiences that most had experienced in their first two years of teaching. While the frustrations of getting an appropriate job are still clearly evident, the level of beginning teacher negativity so powerfully reflected in studies by Leong (1999), Lang (1999) and McCormack (2001) were not evident in the early career phase of this cohort. While the accounts were essentially positive about their continued commitment to being a teacher, up to a quarter of these beginning teachers indicated that they are unlikely to be teaching in Australia.

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